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For Smart Policy, We Need Centralized Intelligence

By ALLAN E. GOODMAN

Despite the publicity and controversy surrounding the Reagan Administration's use of covert action in Central America and elsewhere, the President believes that a major achievement in his first term has been substantial improvement in the performance of U.S. intelligence. Congress, however, disagrees: The Senate and House select committees overseeing intelligence have just released public versions of their reports on performance during 1983-84, and the news is not good.

The Senate report concludes that, with respect to intelligence analysis and production, "analysts are not producing enough basic data to meet important intelligence requirements. Instead, analytic efforts seem to emphasize short-term 'current' intelligence products." With respect to intelligence collection, the report noted "a growing imbalance between collection and analytic capabilities," "persistent gaps in information on certain subjects of great importance to national security" and the need to "shift away from the collection of data that is currently proving to be of diminishing value."

The House committee's report found "a need for improved performance on the part of intelligence collectors and analysts," "a clear need for better coordination between the users of intelligence and the providers of intelligence," "that care had to be taken lest analytic thought succumb to pressure to support rather than inform policy" and the fact that "shortcomings in analysis and collection continue to appear."

Such shortcomings have led to repeated and widespread concern about the accuracy of intelligence. Charges of intelligence failure have surfaced over the estimates of Soviet defense spending, the accuracy of arms-control monitoring, the threats against the American Embassy and Marine barracks in Beirut, the viability of the Lebanese army, the nature and extent of the Cuban presence in Grenada and the likely outcome of elections in El Salvador, as well as the activities of that country's right-wing death squads.

When Yuri V. Andropov, the Soviet leader, died last year, intelligence was apparently slow to pick up the signs that this had happened. And when King Hassan of Morocco, a major U.S. ally in North Africa, announced that he had proposed and entered into a union with Col. Moammar Kadafi's Libya, intelligence was caught by surprise.

It is not easy for outsiders to judge the performance of intelligence, and we have no basis on which to compute a track record. Neither this Administration nor its predecessors have provided any public details of successful intelligence operations.

It is scarcely reassuring, however, that recent failures are consistent with patterns of failure in the past. In fact, the quality of the information that has been provided by the intelligence community has been seriously questioned for some time. There have been at least 30 alleged intelligence failures investigated by Congress or the press since 1960, and most of them have involved issues and threats of major strategic, diplomatic or economic importance to the United States.

There is much that our intelligence community can do on its own to improve its performance. For example, a central, community-wide foreign-intelligence data base should be created to assure that an analyst working on a specific problem would have access to all information collected. It is shocking that, after more than a decade of trying, the intelligence agencies still have not developed such a capability. In fact, the tendency of each agency is to expand its own collection and processing capability and to restrict dissemination of the product.

These tendencies will never be effectively suppressed as long as the separate agencies are rivals for resources and the attention of policy-makers. The United States is further today from having truly centralized intelligence collection or analysis than it has been since the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor.

Reorganizing the way our intelligence services collect, analyze and disseminate the knowledge essential for national decision-making should be a high priority for the new Administration. In particular, a return to the concept of central intelligence collection and analysis would help improve the performance of both tasks. Such centralization (along with the separation of collectors from analysts) would break down agency-erected barriers to the badly needed sharing of *all* information.

The United States should establish a central collection agency, able to command and mix human and technical intelligence effectively. This mix should be determined without fear of how it will affect the power, status or budget of various agencies. We also need a central agency for research and analysis, where the best talent can be deployed to work in as much depth as necessary. These two agencies should replace the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and the other intelligence organizations lodged throughout the federal bureaucracy.

In the past the intelligence community has been reorganized in response to failure. But none of these reorganizations have significantly changed the managerial system or improved the quality of analysis. The lack of centralized intelligence collection and analysis is the root of the problem.

If it not addressed now, further disasters lie ahead.

Allan E. Goodman is associate dean of Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. This is adapted from an article in the Winter, 1985, issue of Foreign Policy.

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